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AUTHOR Eisold, Barbara
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the gendering of self of a young boy who has two males as parents, from the view point of his female psychotherapist. During the 2 years of psychotherapy, the young boy was preoccupied with the need to create a kind of mother. He referred to his female caretaker as "Real Mommy" whom he loved and to his psychotherapist as "The Pretend!" mother who was not to love him, and he created a Playdough mother which he used to play a number of roles. His behavior was what he thought appropriate of a loving man who would love a woman, marry her and have his own children. In order to elaborate his constructed understanding of what a boy was supposed to be, the factors of his early heterosexual identification are described. These factors are: (1) an early "working model" of a female caretaker; (2) an early "working model" of a family consisting of his biological father and his female caretaker; (3) learning gender differences in school; (4) separation drama by the abrupt departure of the female caretaker; and (5) lack of information and confusion about his same-sex parents' relationship. (AS)

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THE CONSOLIDATION OF EARLY HETEROSEXUAL GENDER IDENTIFICATION IN THE YOUNG SON OF TWO MEN: A CLINICAL PRESENTATION[1]

My object here is to present observations made during the first two years of psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy with a child called Nick, which began when he was four and one half. Nick's parents were "Daddy", his biological father, and "Don", his father's partner. I want to focus on the ways in which Nick used me, his female psychotherapist, because the themes that emerged with me were organized around the wish to have a woman as his love partner. In order to satisfy this wish he seemed to need to create me as a kind of "Mother". With this as background, I want to think about the many interacting determinants of NIck's preoccupation with this theme, but because of time constraints, you will be hearing only the bare bones of what is a much longer paper.

Briefly, "Nick's parents, "daddy" and "Don" had been partners for 10 years before they decided to raise children together. "Daddy" was 20 years older than Don. Both men were extremely hard-working professionals, although "Daddy" had much more experience in the world and believed that, if he worked hard, there was nothing he wanted to achieve that was out of reach. He wanted a biological child of his own, and, with "Don's" consent,

[1] This presentation is summarized from a much longer one, available upon request from the author.

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courageously arranged to have one. "Don", in contrast, had moved in with "Daddy" when he was barely twenty and was just beginning to come into his own around the time that Nick was born; dispositionally he was both more thoughtful and more patient than the much more impulsive "Daddy".

When Nick was finally born "Daddy" was at the hospital to take him home. Immediately upon doing so, however, he hired a woman to live with them, to do the household chores and care for Nick during the work week. Thus, this child, the son of men, had a woman as his primary caretaker. Unacknowledged as such, she also became the person who taught both men how to care for an infant.

Nick began school (day care) at two. He was very active there. Finally at four and one half he was referred for therapy because he was particularly demanding of attention and often hit children and adults.

Nick began psychotherapy playing a repetitive game about "MommY'. His history included the loss of his primary caretaker - "B"- when he was two and one half. She was fired overnight when her flirtatious behavior with "Daddy", difficult for "Don" always, finally became unbearable. She was replaced by a second woman who arrived at the same time as an adopted child. At this stage, therefore, Nick sustained a whole series of losses, most of all of his caretaker, "B".

In his telling of the tale it was "B" who had been his "Real Mommy" and the loss he remembered was the loss of her. At the top of his lungs, at the beginning of our work together, he informed

me that I was not "The Real B', but "The Pretend!" and that I was not to love him. He did love the "Real B", he said. In actual fact, she had been less than ideal as a mommy. She had been rigid in regard to cleanliness and punishing of NIck's often uncontainable behavior, as well as she had been flirtatious with his "Dad". Nevertheless, in play he bid her goodbye, using a toy airplane. She boarded the plane, smilingly waved "Bye bye Baby" and was gone, while I (taking up Baby's voice) mourned her going.

In the next series of episodes Nick bought a mother with Playdough, which he fashioned with great intensity for the purpose. This mother was a kindly one; she fed him the food he liked and read him stories. Based on stories he knew, and family doll play at school (in which he participated regularly) he used her to play a host of roles: baby, peer/husband, marriage and honey moon, strong man etc. In all of these episodes he was the Director and I fell into line as I saw fit, often elaborating the role I seemed to be assigned. The honeymoon game was especially poignant, as it included long sweet looks at me and the exchange of pretend food. Later, while screaming "Don't love me!" into my ears, he worked hard on establishing gender constancy at the same time as he worked to fashion behaviors that seemed to him appropriate in order to be a loving man with a woman, one who would not compel him to marry <u>her</u>. He frequently announced that when he grew up he would be a "man" and have children of his own with a woman, presumably of his own choice. Pregnancy fascinated him. Unfortunately I cannot describe the clinical material in any more detail here because of

time limitations.

In trying to understand the way in which Nick constructed his understanding of the boy he was supposed to be, particularly in relation to the way in which he wanted to love a woman, I have, in the longer presentation, outlined a series of interrelated factors, all of which were present in his life long before I arrived on the scene. These briefly are:

A very early "working model" (Bowlby, 1973) of attachment to a female mothering figure. I have used Bowlby's concept here to understand the quality of the attachment I experienced with Nick in the honeymoon play described above. As reviewed by Diamond & Blatt, (1994) such models are believed to be derived from actual interactions which are internalized as dyadic attachment experiences and guide later relationships. Along with this model of a relationship with a woman went, for Nick,

An early "working model" of family. According to Nick he had possessed a Mommy and a Daddy from the very beginning, just like everyone else. I believe this "model" was based on the fact that "B" and his "Daddy" were, in fact, the two who met most intensely at the beginning over his care. "Don", the least experienced at childcare, was a third party to this bond at the beginning, although that certainly changed as Nick aged.

A third factor was early school attendance and the learning of gender distinctions. Nick participated vigorously in doll-corner play at school, where he observed the roles of mother and father played out everyday. Furthermore, there were the stories read to

him and the family chronicles he saw on video tapes at home. In all of these only heterosexual families were described. Nowhere did he see another family in which two fathers divided the parenting role between them.

Separation trauma was a fourth factor: I believe that the abrupt departure of "B", when he was two and a half, just at the end of the rapprochment phase, was experienced by Nick as a traumatic loss and thus helped to "fix" his relationship with her in his mind as something to work at.

A fifth factor was lack of information about the true nature of his parents relationship. "Daddy" and "Don" never made the nature of their relationship clear to Nick. They described neither their committment to one another, nor the sexual bond between them. "Daddy" further confused the issue by telling Nick that he "loved" his birthmother, as well as the housekeeper. To this day (Nick is now eight) his fathers have not been forthcoming about their relationship and Nick continues to struggle with these issues.

Other contributing factors, I believe, were Nick's temperament, his parents' acceptance of aggression and wish to have a heterosexual son, as well as the models they provided for him of strength and independence. Unfortunately there is not enough time here to describe all this.

Nick's case raises a number of interesting questions about the gendering of self and about child care in new family constellations. In regard to the former, clearly the route each person takes to become a member of one gender or another is

entirely unique. There is considerable evidence now that children themselves work hard to achieve this, using their earliest perceptions as the base on which to add other data later (Fagot, 1995).

As for the subject of child care, much careful thought needs to be given by same sex couples about how and when to tell their children about the nature of their own relationship. Respect for the child's need to have a mother or father must also be considered, along with the implications of early attachment to non-family child care workers. Unfortunately, a full discussion of these issues is not possible here.

THANK YOU

Barbara Eisold, Ph.D.
285 Central Park West
New York, 10024